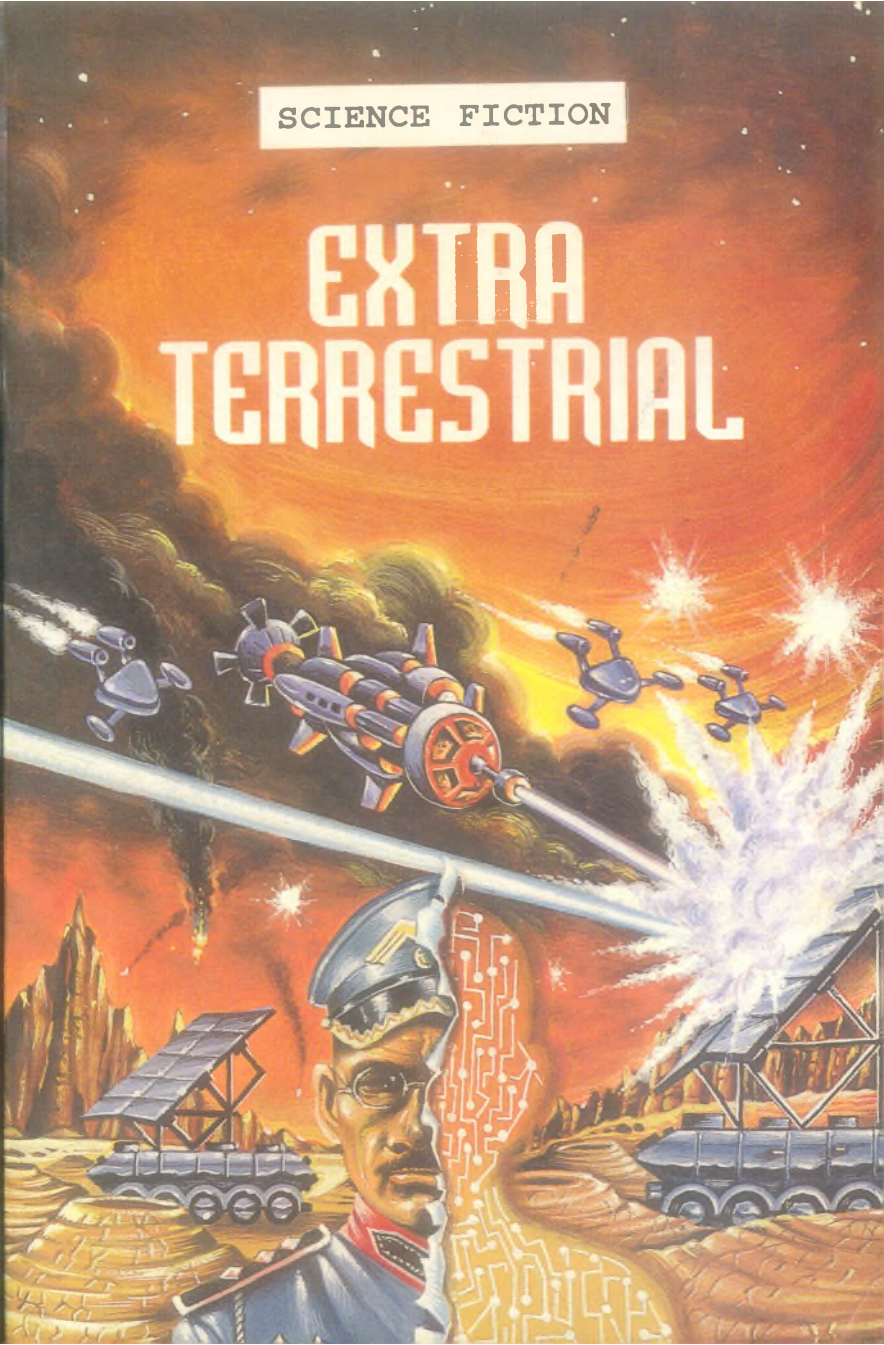
SCIENCE FICTION

# EXTRA TERRESTRIAL



# EXTRA TERRESTRIAL

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*To* ***Raghu,***
*our original co-production*

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# 1
# The Trap

Fear lay over the city.

Like a miasma it rose from the ground, and enveloped the city palpably, turning it almost into a ghost town by night. As dusk fell, the streets grew noticeably deserted, with only the hurried footfall of an occasional passer-by breaking the steady and monotonous tramp of patrolling policemen. A couple of cars, an odd scooter and maybe a bus—that was all. What a change from the hustle and bustle that evening used to bring.

Even shops closed early these days, ostensibly due to lack of customers, but in reality because neither the assistants nor the shopkeepers themselves wanted to stay out late; for death stalked the city during dark, having donned the horrifying mantle of a werewolf.

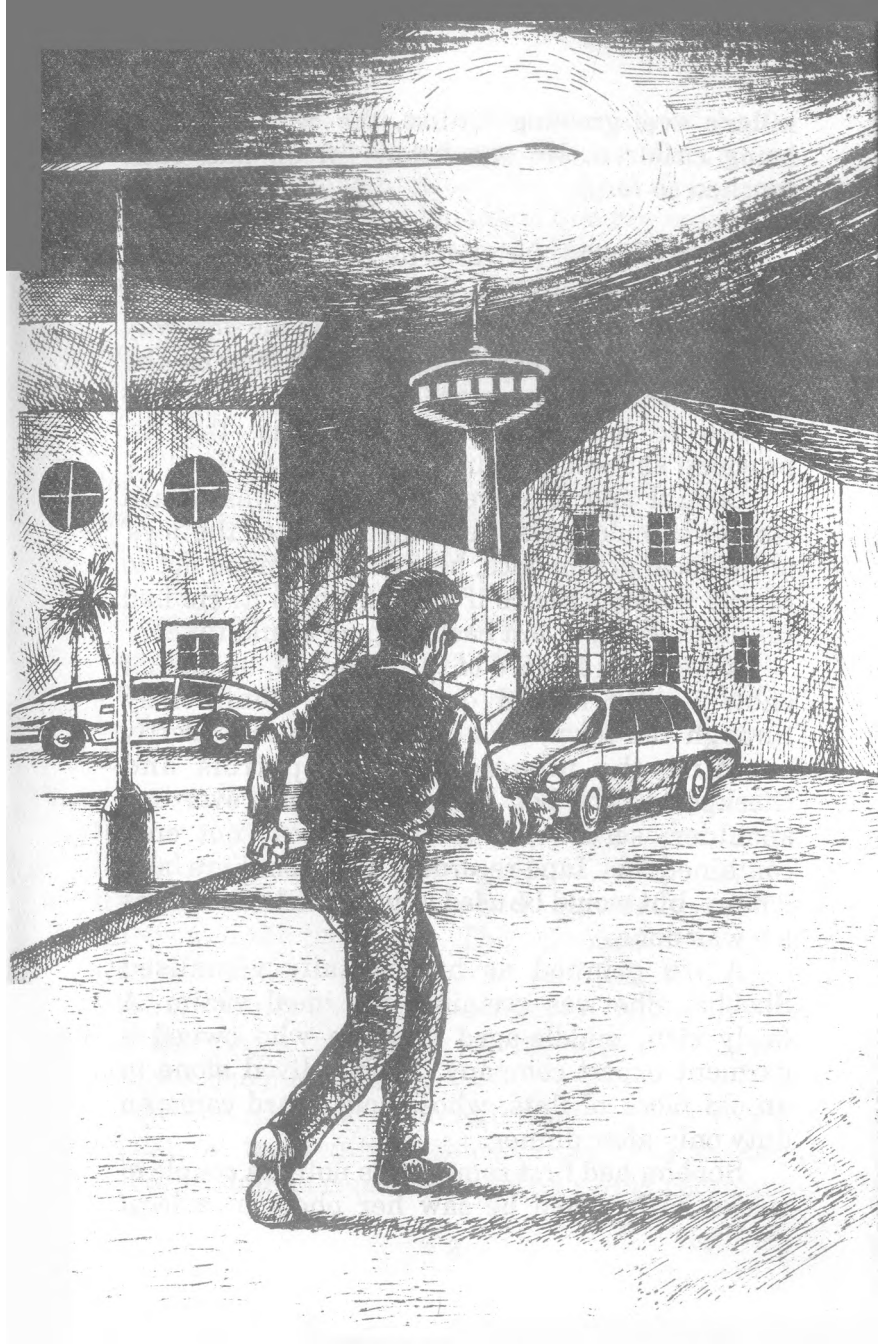
Werewolves in this day and age? With the world poised on the brink of the twenty-first century? Officially, of course, there was no such creature, and the fourteen corpses that had been found over the last two months, with their throats

torn, were allegedly the work of a maniac. But the citizens knew differently. Twice the monster had been spotted; once, while it was actually in the process of killing one of its victims. Both the eye-witnesses, who had been fortunate enough to get away unseen, swore that it was a gigantic wolf-like creature, but could not provide more detailed descriptions due to the intervening darkness and the distance from which they had seen it.

The police dismissed both accounts as the by-products of over-active imaginations, but the newspapers had a field-day with screaming headlines and sensational 'in-depth' investigations on the origins and habits of were-wolves. As a result, rumours ruled the roost and the entire population was convinced that a monster was loose in the town.

One thing, however, puzzled everybody. As per folklore and legend, werewolves were humans who could turn into wolves. But such a phenomenon was supposed to be possible only on full-moon nights, and this was not what was happening. The killings taking place, supposedly linked to the appearance of the werewolf, did not seem to have any connection whatsoever with any particular phase of the moon.

The werewolf was evidently choosy. He took only one victim per night. The time-interval between the various victims varied widely. Its victims did not fit into any standard pattern. Old and young, male and female, rich and poor—almost every sort of group was represented on the



killer's ever-growing hit-list, the only exception being children. No one below fifteen had been touched so far....

Amru looked forward to an enjoyable and profitable evening. The deserted streets did not worry him as he surreptitiously made his way through them. In fact, the lack of people on the roads suited him fine, since there would be no one around to hear his victim's screams—that is, provided she would be in a position to scream.

Bestial and depraved though he was, Amru was a meticulous planner. Having tasted the 'joys' of the local prison once, he was determined not to repeat the experience if he could help it. He had therefore thought out each step he would take.

If Amru had heard of the werewolf, he did not show it. He moved quietly and confidently through the town, at a fairly fast pace, expertly avoiding the numerous police patrols and checkposts. The bag he carried, slung over one shoulder, served a dual purpose. It not only contained his tape-recorder, skeleton keys and jemmy, but would be used to hold the loot once his job was done.

Amru grinned as he mentally visualised Shobha. She was certainly the ideal victim. A fairly rich, middle-aged socialite who owned a garment export company, Shobha lived alone in an old block of flats, whose sole guard came on duty only after dinner.

Shobha had first come to his notice a couple of weeks back, when he saw her photo in a local

paper. She had been snapped while attending a VIP wedding reception and, despite the poor newspaper reproduction, he had felt an immediate and irresistible attraction towards her as he poured over the picture, which showed her loaded with jewellery.

Finding her address had been easy. It would not be the first time that he had used guile and cunning of a high order to further his evil intentions.

Arriving at his destination, Amru had a quick look around. He had already reconnoitred the area a couple of days back, but was taking no chances. Pleased by the fact that the place looked almost deserted, Amru walked into the building where Shobha had her apartment. As he turned the corner, he noticed a well-dressed, middle-aged couple getting into the lift. Amru deliberately held back, so that they would not be able to see his face.

The lift doors closed, and Amru moved forward. Arriving outside Shobha's door, he halted under the passageway light. Taking out his handkerchief he stretched upwards and unscrewed the light bulb. The surrounding area, was immediately plunged into darkness. Putting the bulb gently down on the floor, he took out the portable tape recorder from his bag and then pressed Shobha's buzzer.

Muted chimes sounded, and he waited. Footsteps, muffled by a thick carpet came up to the door, and he could feel Shobha's eyes peering

out through the magic-eye. Thanks to his precaution of removing the bulb, all that she could see was a vague figure in jeans, a dress common to both men and women these days.

"Who is it?" Her voice was firm and confident.

Amru immediately released the pause button of the tape-recorder.

"I'm Monica, a friend of Sheela's. She has sent something for you. Can I come in and give it to you?"

It was unmistakably a woman's voice, and though it came from the tape-recorder, to anyone inside the apartment it would seem to be coming from the figure standing in the corridor.

"Sure!" Shobha said unhesitatingly.

The moment the door started opening. Amru hit it with his shoulder, putting his entire weight behind the blow. Caught by surprise Shobha staggered back, bumped into a chair which overturned, and then fell down on the carpet herself. Amru leapt in, closed the door behind him, locked it and pocketed the key.

Pulling out a revolver with its attached silencer from his waistband, he pointed it towards the fallen lady and said, "Now don't make a sound, if you want to keep on living!"

Amru felt excitement build up in him and his heart beat faster as he stared at Shobha's fine jewellery. She had evidently just returned from a party.

Her greying hair gleamed in the subdued lighting; her finely chiselled features looked more

regal than ever, despite the expression of shocked surprise on them. A diamond necklace shimmered round her delicate throat. Rubies gleamed in her earrings, in the rings on her fingers and on the circlets of gold around her wrists. The colour of the stones matched her superbly cut red dress.

'My God!' Amru thought. 'She is certainly the most refined lady that I have ever seen in my life. What a pity that I have to kill her."

"Get up!" said Amru, roughly, as he advanced towards Shobha. "Get up and take off your jewellery; and don't make a sound if you value your life. I will not kill you unless I am forced to do so." Amru knew that he was a plausible liar.

Slowly, Shobha rose and turned towards him. Her face was oddly composed and free from all traces of fear or loathing. And then a cold shiver went down Amru's spine and his hair stood on end, as she moved in his direction. For as she did so, a low growl came from her throat, and a transformation started taking place in her in front of his eyes. She ripped off her dress as her body changed shape.

The gun fell from Amru's nerveless hand. His paralysed vocal chords could hardly bring forth half a scream before the creature, who seconds before had been Shobha, tore out his throat with a single blow of its massive paw.

The werewolf had claimed its fifteenth victim.

# 2
# Old Soldiers Never Die

I think it was on the tenth or eleventh day after my arrival that I first met the Colonel. Having come back from the dam site before 10 p.m., for the first time, I was sitting in the verandah of the rest-house, relaxing in one of those huge easy chairs.

The white-haired cook had just brought me a large whisky along with some ice-water. I was just about to say "cheers" to myself, when a loud "Hello there!" almost caused me to jump. I turned round to see a plumpish, elderly, balding individual with a bristling moustache, coming up the drive. He mounted the steps to the verandah with hand extended. So I got up and shook it. I almost regretted I had done so, for he had a grip of steel.

"Good evening! I'm Colonel Tara," he said.

I introduced myself and told the cook to bring an additional glass and we toasted each other's health.

As we sipped, I looked my visitor over. Apart from his almost caricature-like resemblance to the popular conception of what an Army Colonel

looked like, the most striking feature about him was his eyes. Deep, jet-black, liquid pools which seemed to have the ability to swallow one up if one gazed into them for too long. They had an aura of infinite sadness lurking somewhere inside them. I had never seen such eyes before. The Colonel seemed to sense my fascination with them and half-turned his head to gaze into the distance.

"Are you working on this new dam that's coming up?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Yeah!" I replied. "I'm the Engineer-in-Charge."

"Are you all alone, or do you also have your family here?"

"I have a wife and a school-going son in Delhi," I answered. "But the question of bringing them here does not arise. My son's studies would be affected and my wife would be bored to death. Anyway this dam will be completed in eighteen months or so, and I'll be able to go on leave twice or thrice in between."

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed the Colonel with what sounded like a sigh. "But living away from one's family is not easy, especially if one is very attached to them."

"Ah!" I remarked. "I forgot that you people in the Army stay separated from your families for long periods of time. You are retired now, I suppose?"

"You can call it that, since I no longer work for a living."

"And your family?"

A cloud passed over his face and he hesitated

before replying. "I lost my entire family many years ago. It was a tragic accident..." his voice trailed off as though the memory of that dreadful event had robbed him of his speech.

Feeling extremely embarrassed, I tried to cover my confusion by loudly asking the cook to bring in some snacks. My faux pas had nearly spolit our evening almost before it had started.

The snacks arrived and we refilled our glasses. As we chatted further, I found out that the Colonel lived all alone in a tiny cottage, located about a kilometre away. A woman from the nearby village came in to do his cooking and washing; and once a week, he went by bus to the nearby town, to buy the few items he needed which were not available locally.

After that evening, the Colonel often came to visit me, always arriving only on those days on which I came back early. He seemed to possess some uncanny sixth sense in this regard, because many times, when I was fully prepared to stay back late, we would be forced to stop work due to some technical snag or the other, and arriving back unexpectedly at the rest house, I would find him strolling in barely ten minutes later. My views about the Colonel's apparent mental powers were reinforced by the cook's confirmation that the latter never called when I was away; but, though I was curious, somehow, I never got round to asking him how he did it.

Gradually I learned a little more about Colonel Tara. He had arrived in the area about fifteen years ago; from where, nobody knew. For

an Army officer, he had brought surprisingly little luggage with him, just half-a-dozen medium-sized suitcases. He had lived in the rest-house for about a month before buying and moving into his present residence. Being an educated and city-bred man in an area inhabited mainly by tribal villagers, he had kept mostly to himself and had become almost a recluse. He also allegedly possessed a mania for security, staying indoors, in a closed room, whenever he was at home. The only time he came out was to have his meals or to meet any visitors.

However, my arrival seemed to have changed him completely, since nobody had seen him move around so much as he had been doing, after I had come. Probably, I said to myself with a touch of self-pride, that I was the first man he had come across in the area, in the decade-and-a-half that he had been there, with whom he could share an intellectual companionship.

This much I learned from others. Since the Colonel was extremely reluctant to talk about himself, and I never pressed him to do so—the thought of the gaffe I had made at our first meeting acted as a deterrent. Of course we talked a lot on other matters, discussing almost every topic under the sun, and I found him to be extremely well-read and knowledgeable.

Almost three months passed before I could find time to pay a visit to Colonel Tara's cottage. I was genuinely surprised to see the spartan layout of his home.

"You seem to have led a simple life, Colonel," I remarked, after some time.

The Colonel sipped deeply, before replying, almost as though he was taking time out to marshal his thoughts. "It is not exactly that, you know. I did have a fair amount of, shall we call it artistic junk but lost almost everything I had in the accident...."

Again his voice trailed off and an infinite sadness seemed to descend on him. I re-experienced the feeling of discomfiture which I had gone through during our initial meeting, when I had asked him about his family. So, once more I changed the subject. It seemed that I would probably never be able to find out, for nobody in the area, as far as I could ascertain, knew anything more than I did. There had been an accident, evidently a serious one, but that was all. Whether it was a road or rail accident, a flood or a fire, no one had been able to ascertain, for the Colonel seemed to get afflicted with laryngeal paralysis whenever the subject came up. Even when he had been pressed to talk by a few busybodies, he had never let on as to what had actually taken place.

Two more months passed. The work had settled down into a stable routine and, thanks to a bit of overtime put in by my subordinates and myself, plus considerable attention paid to labour welfare, we were ahead of schedule. I began thinking that I could safely go on leave for a few days, entrusting the project to Bhattacharya, the seniormost engineer next to me. 'Bhatta', as he

was known, was a bachelor, and his entire life revolved around his job. Though still in his late twenties, he had risen fast through the ranks, due to sheer persistence, hard work and intelligent application of uptodate technical knowledge, of which he had a considerable amount.

I contacted the Head Office and was granted ten days leave, starting two weeks after that date. Next, I made arrangements for my air-ticket from the nearest Vayudoot-served airfield which was a four-hour drive away. Then, with my heart singing in anticipation, and my mind busy, thinking of what presents to buy, I headed for the rest-house. First of all, I thought, I must write a letter to my wife and give her the good news.

Reaching the rest-house, I found the Colonel waiting for me. In my buoyant mood, I failed to realise that this was the first time that he had arrived at the rest-house before I had. I did however notice that he looked considerably pale and depressed, and yet relieved, in an odd sort of way. Since I had not seen him for almost a fortnight, I assumed that he had been unwell.

"Good evening, sir!" I boomed, cheerfully. "Long time no see. Been ill or something?"

"Good evening!" he replied. His voice was low and sombre and his face drawn, but from his eyes, it seemed that some vast weight had been removed from his shoulders. It was a puzzling combination.

"I want to talk to you about something important," he added.

I was surprised at the seriousness of his tone.

Not that he had ever been the jolly, joking type, but generally he spoke in a fairly light-hearted, careless and detached way—as though nothing particularly mattered much to him—except, of course, when the subject of his family, or the accident, came up.

We sat down, were served our drinks and I said, "Fire away."

He literally did just that. His first sentence exploded in my face like a heavy mortar bomb.

"I am an alien," he started. "I do not belong to Earth."

"But... but..." I started to protest. He put up his hand to cut me off.

"Let me finish my story in peace," he entreated. "I assure you that it is one hundred per cent true. After it is over, then you are welcome to ask me as many questions as you wish. I promise to answer all of them to the fullest extent that I can."

I leaned back in my chair, suppressing my curiosity and my disbelief. Picking up my drink, I took a sip and said, "Go ahead. I am all ears."

The spaceship 'Klptzyxm' came out of overdrive about a tenth of a parsec away from the yellow, G-type star. It had been a long journey and Colonel Tzrz, the ship's commanding officer, and his crew of four were very tired. They were on their way home and this was probably the last star-system that they would map, unless their instruments located another sun with planets around it, during the remaining days of the exploratory part of their journey. That then would

positively be the last one, since they were almost out of recording tapes and their supplies were low.

As the ship raced towards the now rapidly brightening star on its ion-drive, Colonel Tzrz took all the standard security precautions. Although their instruments had indicated that the entire system was in an extremely primitive state of development, with only one planet showing any signs of intelligent activity, he was taking no chances. All the defence screens were up and robot alarms switched on. Being only a survey-ship, his craft was not too well armed, but then he was not expected to engage in battle. Flight, rather than fight was their basic tenet. Their primary task was to get the staggering volume of data they had gathered, home. In ten years, through sheer grit and with a bit of luck, they had managed to map a significant percentage of this particular spiral arm of the galaxy. It was a stupendous achievement and Colonel Tzrz was proud of it. His boys had been wonderful and had worked like machines, without complaining. He was going to recommend all of them for promotion. He, most probably, would get one himself.

With these and other similar pleasant thoughts running through his head, the Colonel checked that everything was alright and then left the control deck to return to his cabin. He wanted to rest a bit before the final part of the survey, so that he could ensure that it was done according to his high standards. As he entered the cabin, his eyes fell on the tri-mentional likeness of his mate

and their offspring. He really missed them. How much he had longed, throughout the trip, for the softness and comfort that only he knew, his companion provided. He was still crazily in love with her despite fifteen years of their togetherness. It could be twenty-five years now, including the ten years of the voyage, and their kids would have matured considerably. Anyway, it would not be too long now before they were reunited, never to be separated again, since no officer was ever given another survery trip to command, after one lasting as long as his had. With a smile on his lips and anticipation in his heart, Colonel Tzrz fell asleep. He slept longer than he should have.

Alarm bells were ringing when he awoke. He had hardly got up from his bunk when Myzx, his second-in-command, who was the ship's radio-officer as well, entered, and saluted.

"Engine fire, sir!" he reported, crisply. "Emergency measures are being taken."

Tzrz wasted no time in asking further questions, but sped towards the control deck with Myzx in tow. Once there, he learned what had happened.

This particular stellar system consisted of ten planets, two of which were gas giants. Their instruments had probed and studied each planet in detail as the ship had circled them one by one—not that it took them long. The entire excercise, including travel time between the planets, had taken less than twelve hours.

The first seven planets, on the way in, showed

no evidence of life. However, the eighth planet, that is, the third one, counting outwards from the sun, turned out to be a different kettle of fish altogether. It not only gave all indications of possessing a large number of inhabitants, but also signs that the civilisation developing on it was in a comparatively advanced stage, for a planet in such a backward sector of the Galaxy. In fact, it appeared that they had already crossed the Second Stage and were well on their way towards the Third Stage—which they would be considered to have reached, when they achieved inter-planetary travel. The planet's atmosphere was of a type fairly common to inhabited worlds, being a nitrogen-oxygen grouping, one of the several different mixtures that could support life. (Tzrz knew that other common groupings included argon-chlorine, the dominant atmospheric mixture on his home planet.)

After mapping this world, the ship had gone further in, checked the two innermost planets, found them devoid of life and then, lowering its defences to conserve energy, turned to continue on its journey home. It was then, when they were nearest to the star, that disaster had struck. A massive solar flare, suddenly shooting out, had caught them by surprise. Crashing head-on into their ion-drive engines, it had overloaded them and set them on fire, turning them into a raging atomic inferno.

The crew of the Klptzyzm had fought the fire valiantly, though unsuccessfully. They prevented the engines from blowing up, but that was all. The

fury of the flames refused to be subdued. There was only one thing left to do—abandon ship. But then the question arose as to where could they go. Their life raft did not possess overdrive capabilities and had a range of only twenty parsecs. There was no suitable world within that distance which had an atmosphere that they could breathe and their space-suits would last them a maximum of three days without being recharged from the ship, a facility not available in the life-raft.

And then, Tzrz remembered, they had a stock of AA tablets with them. These AA, or Atmosphere Adaption tablets, when consumed, built up a thin filter membrane inside their lungs. This allowed their lungs to adapt to hostile atmospheres, provided the latter were not too corrosive in nature. The effect of each tablet lasted for over a week and their ship's store contained several hundred tablets.

"We will go down onto the populated third planet of this sytem." Colonel Tzrz gave his decision. "We will land at night on some deserted spot and hide the life-raft. Since the inhabitants are also of humanoid form like us, we should have no difficulty in mingling with them. By taking AA tablets, we will not need to use our space-suits and hence can remain totally inconspicuous. Once we activate the computerised translators imbedded in our brains, we should also have no problems with their language. Since the ship's communication system has been damaged by the fire, we will wait till we land, before we send a

message for help on the life-raft's hyper-relay. With luck, we should get picked up within a week or so."

They had hurriedly loaded the life-raft with the data-tapes on which they had stored their findings of the last ten years, quickly gulped down an AA tablet each, then boarded the raft and set off. Behind them, their ship, now ablaze from nose to stern, gave them a fiery farewell.

Unfortunately, in all the rush and confusion they had not had time to check the life-raft thoroughly. Which was a pity, because it was only a small part which had been damaged by the intense heat of the burning spaceship, a part that could easily have been replaced—a small but very important part—the valve that controlled the feeding of the deceleration fuel, the malfunctioning of which would prevent the life-raft from slowing down as it landed.

"We had planned to come down in the desert, in the southern part of the USA, a place they call New Mexico," said the Colonel, concluding his tale. "Our life-raft being unable to slow down, crashed and was totally destroyed. My crew and I ejected, but it was a little too high up and we did not have what you call parachutes. All four of my men were killed. I was the only survivor, and that too purely by chance—I landed on a dense bush which broke my fall, though it nearly broke my back as well. The bodies of my companions were found by the Authorities, as I found out later, but they managed to hush the matter up and the public never came to know anything about it. An

official report on the subject however, exists among the CIA's classified files. Somehow I made my way to the nearest habitation, the hut of a poor farmer. He looked after me till I was well enough to travel. At first I nearly starved to death, but gradually, my body got used to your food, and I learned to eat it. After several years of wandering around, I reached India.

The sun had gone down and it had become dark. Overhead sparkled myriads of other suns which we know as stars. If his story was true, then the Colonel's home world circled one of them. Which one, I wondered.

I ordered fresh drinks and then, as the Colonel did not seem inclined to say any more, I felt I was now free to ask questions.

"When did all this happen?" I asked him.

"Oh, a long, long time ago," he replied. "Over forty years back. Going by your calendar, I would say, sometime in late 1951 or early 1952. I never did manage to exactly date our accident—at least not by your standards of measuring time."

"But I thought that you said, you people could not survive in our atmoshpere. Then how come..."

"Good question," replied the Colonel, cutting me off. "Again it was purely my good or bad luck that, as Captain of the ship, it was I who was carrying the AA tablet supply. As I told you, I had several hundred of them to start with—almost fifteen hundred, if I remember correctly. Then I stretched them out to the maximum, restricting my activity, to prevent breathing in too much of

your air. That is why I spend so much of my time locked up in my room, in semi-suspended animation."

"Which star do you come from? Where is your home world?"

The Colonel shook his head sadly. "I did try to find out what you people called it, but totally failed in all my efforts. I was an excellent navigator and a good astronomer, which I had to be, considering my profession, but your system of designating the location of stars is completely different from ours. Not surprising, since there are nearly a hundred such systems, each having its own merits and demerits. Also your datum baseline is naturally different from the one I am used to. So I could never locate my native sun."

"How old are you, Colonel?" I next asked.

"As far as I can make out, one year of my world is approximately equal to two of yours. I had just crossed forty-five when the accident took place. So according to our time, I am now sixty-five, while as per Earth-years, I would be nearly one hundred and thirty."

"How did you live for so long? I mean, how did you eat, buy clothes and so on? Where did you get the money from?"

"I told you that I landed in the extreme south of the U.S.A. In the beginning, while doing odd jobs for a living, I used to dream of building a suitable communication system, by which I would be able to send a message to my own world, to inform them of my location. For this, I needed the latest technology. This technology I found, at a

place now called Silicon Valley. But to obtain it, I needed money. Since I was desperate, I joined a gang of drug smugglers. We were lucky; we had half-a-dozen good cross-border trips without getting caught. Deciding to get out while we were still ahead, as the Authorities had started cracking down hard on our type of gangs, we split up. My share of profits, though being the least since I was the newest member, still came to a small fortune. However, when I went to purchase the technology that would enable me to get in contact with my home planet, I found it too primitive. It was not accurate enough for my purposes, especially since I had only a vague idea as to where I was trying to reach. I therefore invested my money in various ventures and am living off the proceeds. Anyway, my needs are few and I don't require much cash."

I finally asked the key question. "Well, sir, how is it that you have now all of a sudden decided to tell it all; to make a clean breast of things? After all, you are taking a risk of being branded as an extra-terrestrial."

"That," he replied with a weary air of finality, "is the crux of the matter. The reason is that I have finally run out of AA tablets. I swallowed the last one this morning. I have less than ten days more to live."

A chill descended on my heart as I heard these words. Over the months I had grown quite fond of the old man.

"But surely your lungs would have adapted permanently by now," I protested, as a sudden

wave of panic swept over me. "Forty years is a long time."

"That it is," he agreed. "But the question of my lungs adapting does not arise. You evidently never did study physiology. It would require several hundred generations, at the very least, for such an evolution-cum-mutation to take place."

"Is there nothing that I can do?"

The despair in my voice must have come through clearly, because the Colonel turned his remarkable eyes fully towards me, gave me an intensely emotional glance, and then softly replied, "I am afraid there is nothing you can do, my friend. Anyway, even though I have developed a fondness for your world and nobody really wants to die, it is time I went. For too long, I have lived the life of an alien. Only one point—think of some story to explain my disappearance after I am gone. Some normal explanation that will not give rise to speculation and conjecture."

"That will be no problem," I said, consideration of the problem detaching me for a moment from the harsher realities. "When your body is found, everyone will assume that you have died due to a heart-attack, which is quite common nowadays. I will arrange it, so that your funeral takes place without any fuss or delay."

"But that will exactly be the problem you see, since there will be no body to be found."

"No body? How can that be?" I asked in surprise.

"It's like this," the Colonel explained. "Over the centuries, as our civilisation developed, we

decided that burning or burying of bodies, or disposing them off in other ways, though a necessity, was an absolute waste of time and resources. So gradually we tailored our genes and our cells in such a way, that when the time comes for us to die, our bodies gradually disintegrate into their basic atoms and get absorbed into the atmoshphere. So that is why you will have to invent some story, since I will just vanish without a trace. Okay, I'm off now. I will come and spend my last day with you and will ensure that everything seems normal. You just think up some good excuse when I am missed."

"I will," I mumbled as I watched him walk off into the night. I was still stupefied with the evening's revelations and was not too sure that I had not been dreaming. In a daze, I went in for dinner.

The days passed swiftly. I had remembered to write to my wife the next morning, but somehow the leave had lost its charm for me. Busy in ensuring that we remained ahead of schedule, I did not find time to vist the Colonel and he did not come to see me either.

And then, one evening, when I returned from work, he was there. With a shock I realized that the ten days were up; that this was the last day of his life. Tonight he was going to die.

We sat down for drinks and made desultory small talk for the benefit of the rest-house staff. He did not stay for long. Finishing his second drink in one large gulp, he whispered, "Leave your room's side doors open. I will come in around

eleven, when everyone else is asleep."

He then got up, wished me good-night in a loud voice, and walked away.

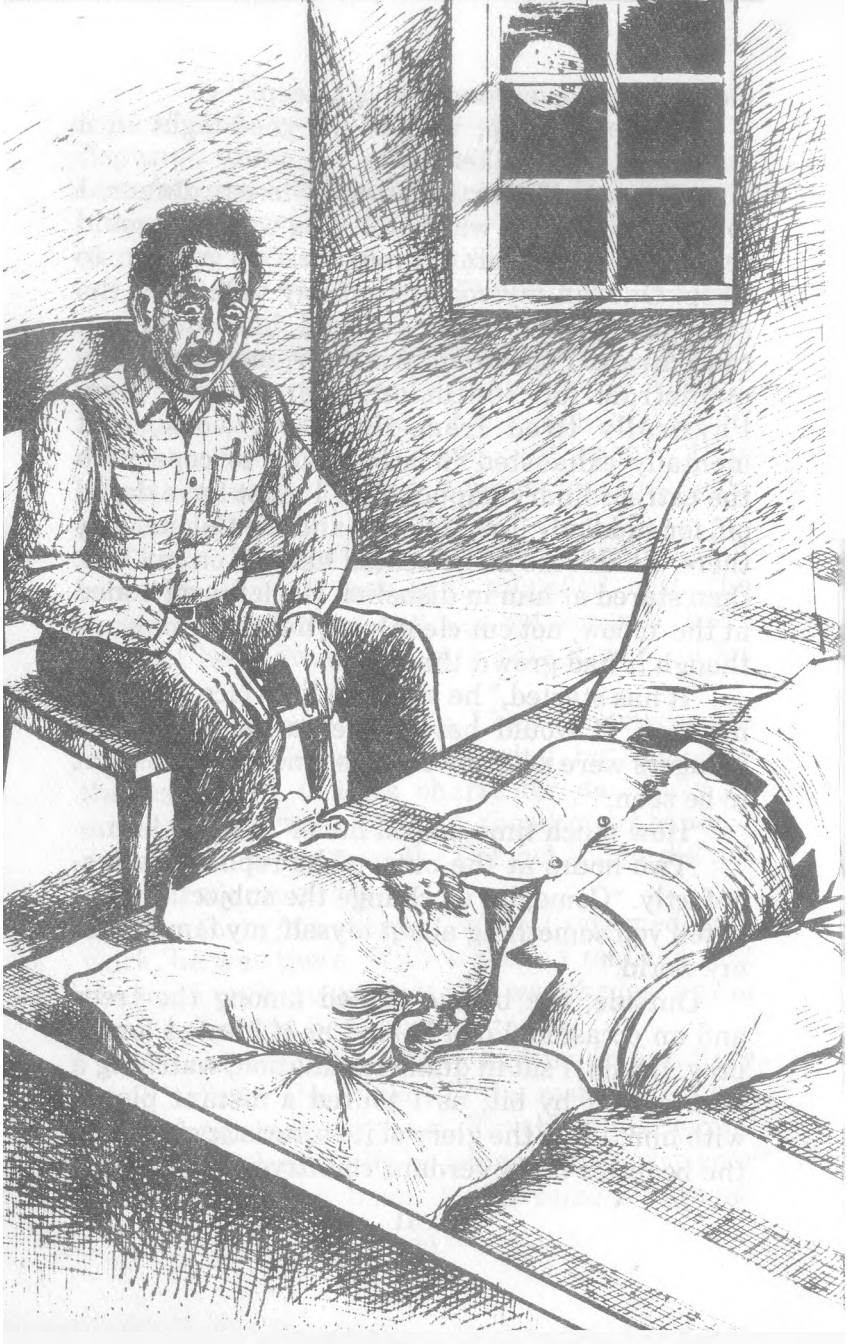
After a half-hearted attempt to eat dinner, I told the cook that I was not feeling well and would retire early. The staff could lock up and go to sleep. Once in my room, I quietly unlatched the side doors, then tried to read but could not concentrate. I sat in an armchair, my thoughts a maelstrom of confusion, worry and fear. Physically tired from the day's work, and mentally exhausted in attempting to cope with the extraordinary happenings, I must have dozed off, for suddenly it was eleven and the Colonel was there. I half-rose as he seated himself on my bed, then stared at him in disbelief. His left arm ended at the elbow, not cut cleanly off but taperingly, as though it had grown that way.

"It has started," he said in a low voice, noticing my look. "I would have come earlier, but some villagers were near my cottage, and I did not want to be seen."

"How much time do you have?" I asked him.

"Two hours at the outset," he replied matter-of-factly. "Come, let us change the subject. I want to tell you something about myself, my family and my world."

Outside, the breeze sighed among the trees and an occasional owl hooted as it hunted for its prey. Inside, I sat in dumb fascination, watching a man die bit by bit, as I toured a distant planet with him. I saw the glory of its futuristic cities and the beauties of its verdant countryside. I saw my



friend grow up and went to college with him. I walked arm-in-arm with him and his future mate, as they strolled in gardens and in parks. I experienced his deeply abiding love for the one who was to be his wife. I attended the birth of his children, suffered the pains of the family's trials, and felt pride in their triumphs and achievements. I was almost one with him.

But all the while he was growing less and less. Within an hour, both his arms and one of his legs had vanished. The other leg was also half gone and he was having difficulty in speaking. He was lying down on my bed now. I gazed at him in sorrow.

"Do not worry. I am not in pain," said he, noticing my concerned look. "But once any vital organ of my body goes, then, I will fall into a coma, and that will be the end. Farewell, my friend. It has been nice knowing you."

He closed his eyes, as gradually the top of his head started disappearing. Slowly his face wavered and faded away; and then, part by part, the rest of him. In half-an-hour more he was totally gone.

I bowed my head and wept.

# 3
# The Black Hole of Calcutta

Emperor Konnel was annoyed. Extremely annoyed in fact.

"These stupid Sanduleakians," he thought. They have the nerve to challenge me—me the ruler of half of the Greater Magallenic Galaxy. I'll teach them a lesson they will never forget."

The reason for the Emperor's annoyance was not far to seek. He was one of the greatest rulers that history had ever seen—at least according to himself. He had condescended to send an embassy to Sanduleak, a star-system which lay on the periphery of his mighty empire. The ambassador was rude, crude and overbearing—a typical Konnel representative. He bluntly stated the Emperor's requirements and presented a pre-drafted treaty which the Sanduleakians were expected to sign. Reading between its lines the latter had realised that Konnel was literally asking them to become his bonded serfs and threatening them with annihilation if they refused.

Ever since Konnel's scientists had invented the Q-Beam, some time back, nothing, it seemed, could stand in his way. The beam, which had the capability of smashing a star to pieces, had been used against the first two systems which had rejected Konnel's overlordship. The next three stellar kingdoms had surrendered without firing a shot. Now it was the turn of the Sanduleak System. Its inhabitants, however, had been far-sighted enough to prepare for this day. Their top scientists, no less brilliant than those owing allegience to Konnel, had perfected a Q-Beam shield. Not really a perfect shield, but still one that worked. And Konnell did not know about it.

So the Sanduleakians did what many had been itching to do for several years. They grabbed hold of the Emperor's ambassador, shaved his head, treated his loud-mouthed crew to a similar tonsorial operation, painted their ship jet-black and sent the whole lot to where they had come from.

No wonder the Emperor was annoyed. He summoned Admiral Zygor who commanded his Supreme Intergalactic Fleet No. 1, and ordered that the sun, Sanduleak, be destroyed at once. The Admiral saluted and left.

The Fleet was immediately put on alert and a few hours later, it took off. In its centre, fully protected from all sides, lay the gargantuan cargo ship which housed the Q-Beam generator. The Sanduleakians had an excellent spy network in Konnel's capital and learned of the Fleet's departure within minutes of its take off. They

immediately activated their shield and positioned it in front of their sun. Since it covered thirty degrees of arc, they were confident that their sun was safe. After the shield had been securely anchored the Sanduleakian Navy, mustered to full strength, positioned itself in ambush in a hollowed-out asteroid, orbiting at the edge of their system. That particular asteroid had been selected because its composition—nearly eighty per cent iron *ore*—completely camouflaged the energy emanating from the engines of their fleet's spaceships and thus prevented its detection.

The Supreme Intergalactic Fleet No. 1 jumped out of hyperspace on the outskirts of the Sanduleakian system, and roared in unchallenged. Behind them, the home fleet assembled and quietly followed, keeping sufficient distance between the two fleets so that they were not detected.

Admiral Zygor was feeling elated. He looked forward to seeing the Q-Beam in action since this was the first time that he would be doing so. His anticipation mounted, as his fleet bored in steadily towards Sanduleak. Too bad that there was no resistance and no chance of a fight, he thought. The cowards were skulking in their hideouts, but that did not matter. Shortly, their hideouts would become totally uninhabitable and then they would be forced to come out. That was when he would teach these upstarts a thing or two about manners.

The Sanduleakians waited till the enemy fleet was ten parsecs away from their sun. Then,

accelerating to full speed, they struck. It was a total surprise. Zygor's men, having eyes only for their target, were caught completely off-guard. Before they could realise what was happening, a third of their fleet had been crippled or destroyed. The remainder fought back desperately.

Zygor's lips curled as he studied the battle on his three-dimensional radarscope. So the Sanduleakian dogs had sprung a surprise on him. Never mind, he would still achieve his aim and destroy their system. He passed rapid orders for the remainder of his fleet to deploy in a protective ring around the Q-Beam ship and the latter to position itself for firing. Within a short while, despite the bitterness of the fighting, everything was ready.

"Fire!" ordered Zygor. A searingly brilliant blue-white ray shot out from the Q-Beam ship towards Sanduleak and bounced back off the invisible shield in front of it. Zygor couldn't believe his eyes.

"What the hell!" he swore. The atmosphere was ionized. "Fire again!"

The blue-white ray leapt out once more, and once again bounced back. And that was the end of it because the Q-Beam ship, for all its massiveness, could only muster enough power for two shots. The energy consumption of the Beam was too high. Zygor realised that he was doomed—doomed if he stayed to fight, doomed if he cut his losses and ran, because Konnel would never forgive him for not carrying out his orders.

The battle raged on.

Unknown to the participants, a secondary drama was taking place far to one side. The reflected Q-Beam, with hardly any loss of energy, encountered an asteroid on its path, out—the same asteroid in which the Sanduleakian Navy had concealed itself. The stupendous power of the Beam, sufficient to destroy a sun, smashed into the asteroid, compressing it unimaginably and turning it into a pinhead-sized black-hole in a nano-second. Moments later the second beam smashed into the same space—into the black-hole. The tiny black-hole absorbed the full energy of the reflected beam and was modified drastically. It also picked up a momentum which propelled it at the speed of light towards the neighbouring Milky Way Galaxy.

Weary years later, the tiny black-hole, shrunk almost to atom-size by now, entered the new galaxy and found its way into one of the spiral arms; into the system of a sun called Sol and onwards, on to its third planet—known to its inhabitants as Earth. Entering the Earth's atmosphere, the drastically modified black-hole slowed down, finally drifting almost capriciously down onto a city called Calcutta.

Although Calcutta, once the capital of the 'Jewel in the British Crown' (i.e., India) has a number of famous buildings and monuments, the one landmark which typically characterises it and by which the rest of the world knows it, is the Howrah Bridge.

When the Englishman, Job Charnoc, originally founded the city in the second half of the

eighteenth Century, the enemy—mainly the remnants of the Mughal Empire—lay to the West. He therefore built Calcutta on the Eastern bank of the Hooghly, keeping the river as a protective moat ahead of the city. Decades later, when the railway eventually came to Calcutta, the line was terminated on the Western bank of the river, probably to save the building of a rail bridge, and the terminus named Howrah (after the District in which it was located). Though the railway later on crossed the Hooghly via the Bally Bridge, Howrah remained Calcutta's major railway station and so the Howrah (road) Bridge was constructed, to enable the City's travelling public to reach the station.

Romanticised in prose and poetry, the theme of several songs, extensively photographed, and the centre-piece of over a dozen films, the Howrah Bridge is a beautifully elegant suspension bridge with its broad and magnificent sweep towering over the quaint local ferry-boats plying the river beneath. Alas, this grandly conceived and superbly constructed structure soon fell prey to the harsh realities of urban life. The population of Calcutta doubled, and then doubled again. The number of people wanting to cross the bridge went up proportionately. The pattern of traffic—a nightmarish mix of trucks, buses, cars, scooters, cycles, rickshaws, pedestrians, cows and dogs—added to the chaos. By the sixties, trying to cross the Bridge, to catch a train, became a game of chance. You could spend three hours, stuck in a jam in the middle of the bridge, dissipating your

temper in puffs of steam, while a few hundred metres away a railway engine did likewise, as it slowly travelled westward, carrying with it your hopes, your berth, your name on a reservation chart, and any chance you may have had of getting your money back from the Railways.

A second Howrah Bridge, therefore, became an imperative necessity, and approval for its construction was finally given after the usual bureaucratic delays. Work on the bridge started, proceeded apace, slowed down, speeded up, stopped and started again—limping along in erratic jerks. Numerous problems beset the builders. To cap it all, just when it seemed that work on the bridge was going to proceed smoothly, some bright politician got the 'brilliant' idea of converting it into a rail-cum-road bridge.

The requirement of another rail bridge across the Hooghly had been felt for some time, but had been pushed into the background due to the overriding priority being given to the second Howrah Bridge. The MLA who mooted the idea of adding a rail-deck to the latter, thus hoped to kill two birds with one stone; that is, obtain extra funds for the second Howrah Bridge and, at the same time, provide an additional trans-Hooghly rail link. He also hoped to kill a third bird—that of making local voters sufficiently conscious of his efforts on their behalf to ensure that he got re-elected a few years hence—but that was a hope he kept well under his hat.

Immediately, the idea was made public, there was a howl from the engineers. It was too late

they said; the foundations had already been laid and it was not feasible to change the design now. On top of it, they argued, rail-cum-road bridges were no longer the 'in' thing and, to clinch the issue, added, that conversion at this stage would extend the construction time by two years, at least—an absolutely unacceptable period considering the problems being faced by the public travelling to and from Howrah Station. But all their protests fell on deaf ears. Both the Central and State Governments sensed the vote-catching potential of the proposal and enthusiastically accepted it. Their ardour was not dampened even when it was pointed out that a road bridge of the same type as the second Howrah Bridge built in Australia some years back, had collapsed under traffic; that one of the contractors building the second Howrah Bridge was the same one who had built the Australian bridge, and that adding additional load to an already suspect design was suicidal.

So the second Howrah Bridge was re-designed and made into a dual-function crossing. Progress of construction was trumpeted in full-page newspaper ads, documetary films, radio features and TV news clips as the Centre and the State both strove to squeeze maximum political mileage out of the Bridge. The contractors, realising the stakes involved, soon joined in, and started their own publicity blitz, bagging three more bridge contracts. The second Howrah (rail-cum-road) Bridge now progressed rapidly since everyone was interested in pushing it. It was completed a full

year ahead of schedule. It then hit its next snag; the fact that the ruling party in West Bengal (the state in which Calcutta is located) was different from the party in power at the Centre.

The State Government wanted the Bridge to be inaugurated by one of its ministers, maybe even the Chief Minister himself. New Delhi, on the other hand, wanted the opening to be done by a Central Minister, preferably one from Bengal. Elections were six months away at that time. There was a total deadlock on the issue and so the Bridge, though complete, remained unutilized while the Central and State Governments fought out a war of words. The long-suffering public still fretted and fumed, as they millimetred their way across the old Howrah Bridge.

In the meantime, Calcutta gained its second distinctive feature. It became the only city in India to have an underground mass-transit system—a metro.

Though not known, or even guessed at that time, the first incident which marked the presence of the minuscule, modified black hole in Calcutta, took place when the 9 a.m. metro train from Tollygunje suddenly vanished into thin air just as it was about to enter the Esplanade terminal. One moment it was there, speeding along merrily, the driver about to start slowing down—and the next moment it was gone. The tracks gleamed under the overhead lights but they bore no load; the tunnel was as empty as mother Hubbard's cupboard. One complete train, packed to capacity with office-goers, had simply ceased to exist.

At first, nobody realised what had happened. The human mind has a wonderful protective mechanism. When something happens that it just cannot understand, something so bizarre that contemplating it may cause the mind to break down, the latter refuses to accept that happening. It suspends belief and rejects the signals being sent to it by the senses, thus preventing itself from cracking up under the overload. So everyone kept on waiting for the train to arrive, long after common sense should have told them that it was definitely not coming. Eventually, enquiries were made and thereafter the mind-boggling truth emerged. An entire train, carrying hundreds of passengers, had disappeared and nobody knew where it had gone. Shocked disbelief gradually gave way to grudging acceptance, and then, the phones started ringing. Even after that, it took a long time before someone plucked up the courage to inform the Writer's Building (from where the State Government functioned) about what had happened. Once they did that, and convinced their listener that they were not joking, all hell broke loose and pandemonium raged. An emergency meeting of the State Cabinet was hastily summoned, at which a bewildered Chief Minister briefed his colleagues. Everyone was thoroughly confused. How could a train just vanish? Had the track been searched thoroughly? Had the train actually started from Tollygunje? Wasn't it possible that it had stopped at one of the intermediate stations or broken down between two stations? This was the threshold of the

twenty-first century and not the dark ages when Tantriks could make entire villages disappear with a single spell. But despite all the doubts, the questions and the scepticism, one fact remained crystal clear—the 9 a.m. train from Tollygunje was missing and just could not be found, despite the best efforts of the official agencies.

The newspapers had a field day. Screaming headlines announced the sensational happening, while anxious relatives, news-hounds, publicity seekers and cranks swamped the Police and other State Administration switchboards with questions, information, suggestions and rumours.

Next morning, the second incident took place. A tram plying in the busy Chowringhee area vanished in front of the startled and unbelieving eyes of scores of onlookers.

The Chief Minister paced his office like a caged tiger. His Home Minister, the Inspector General of Police, and the Head of the State Intelligence Bureau, stood before him—literally on the carpet.

"What in the name of God is happening?" asked the CM rhetorically. Nobody commented on the irony of the phraseology being used by a man who was a dedicated Marxist. Things were too serious just then. "Here we are with trains and trams vanishing from right under our noses, within a stone's throw of the Writer's Building, and we are doing nothing about it."

"What can we do sir?" the Inspector General of Police interjected. "We questioned at least twenty witnesses about this morning's incident and all of them swear that the tram disappeared just like

that." He was about to snap his fingers, but changed his mind at the last instant. "One of the witnesses was hardly five metres away, and he says that one moment the tram was there, and the next moment there was nothing. He was so startled that he fell off his cycle, and injured himself. I know it seems foolish to say so, but it looks like black magic to me. I'm sorry, sir, but my Force is just not designed to deal with such happenings."

The CM paused in his pacing, and looked hard at the IG. The latter looked back, steadily. He was in deadly earnest and he was a man whose reputation for competence, practical hard-headedness, and ability to get to the bottom of things, was legendary.

The CM turned to his Home Minister. "And what do you think?" he shot at him.

The Home Minister looked uncomfortable, and paused before replying. "I do not know what to make of it, sir," he finally said, "I am no believer in magic and similar superstitions, but these incidents are something out of the ordinary. They pass my understanding competely."

The CM then turned to the fourth man in the room, his Intelligence Chief. The latter was ready with his answer. "We have absolutely no clue of any sort despite an all-out effort. We have contacted every source that we possess, but nobody seems to know anything about this case. It is just unbelievable."

The CM resumed his pacing, thinking furiously. His subordinates, though standing still,

were doing the same. Round and round their thoughts went, but success was not theirs.

Four hours later, almost exactly ten hours after it had disappeared, the missing tram reappeared, moving along the part of the line which ran near Sealdah Railway Station. Its sudden appearance, fortunately, on an almost deserted stretch of road, caused a greater sensation than its disappearance had done. The driver, sensing that something was wrong, halted the tram in the middle of the street. An alert policeman came up to see what the matter was and, realising that this tram was the one the entire City was being scoured for, immediately forbade anybody from entering or leaving it. Standing guard on his prize, he sent a passer-by to phone Police HQ.

The return of the missing tram did nothing to sort out the CM's problems. In fact, it only made them worse since every single person on board—man, woman or child; hawker, businessman or official; and its driver—testified that there had been absolutely no break in their sense of time-continuum, between their disappearance and appearance hours later, three kilometres away. A quick check of their watches only confirmed the truth of their statements. The timepieces were all ten hours slow—a physical impossibility, a practical reality—their owners had all lost ten hours each out of their lives. Confusion mounted steadily, since nobody knew what was happening, and the Metro train, the first object to have disappeared, had yet to be found.

The next week turned out to be a nightmare for the city. Cars, trams, scooters, buses and

rickshaws disappeared, seemingly at random. Though the first object to have disappeared did not come back, everything else returned, hours or a day later, in a totally different place, with the humans involved, having absolutely no idea about the intervening time period. Fortunately, for all concerned, the re-appearances invariably took place at spots which were reasonably clear and so there were no major mishaps, though two persons did sustain injuries when the scooter they were travelling on suddenly materialised five metres behind a car halted at a red light. But what would happen if a tram or a bus vanished and then decided to come back in the middle of rush-hour traffic? The CM and his officials shuddered at the thought.

In the meantime, the local, national and international media painted the town red. Headlines 140 points high; sensational cover stories; TV and radio interviews and discussions; movie documentaries—the hysteria was threatening to get out of hand. Fabulous sums were offered for a genuine filmed sequence showing an actual disappearance or appearance, thus causing hundreds of amateur and professional photographers to cruise the city. None of them got what they wanted, but they did succeed in further jamming the already chaotic traffic.

Prayers were offered, blessings invoked, tantriks and other practitioners of the 'black arts' engaged to 'purify' the city, and ancestors placated—all to no avail. Private detectives

searched every nook and corner of the city. Nobody had the least inkling as to what was going on. Well, not exactly nobody. At least one person thought he did.

Dr. Mihir Sen, Head of the Physics Department of the University of Calcutta, had taken on the task of solving 'The Case of the Missing Metro Train', as a personal challenge. He was a brilliant scientist with an outstanding academic record. But he was no mere theorist, no dreamer with his head in the clouds. Practical applications of computer solutions, duly modified for field conditions, were his forte. Besides his interest in the subject, as such, Dr. Sen had one more reason—a much more compelling one—to want to solve the problem. His wife had been among the commuters who, along with the train they were on, had vanished on that fateful morning seven days ago.

Sen set about his task in the same methodical manner in which he approached all his problems, and which had brought him so many of his past successes. He first read up anything and everything about the disappearances that he could lay his hands on. Every report, every story, every conjecture, every theory. He mentally dismissed most of what he read as hogwash and then took some time off to visit the actual disappearance and re-appearance sites. These he marked on a large-scale map of the city, the goings in red and the coming-backs in blue, giving each pair of incidents a number, and making brief notes describing the sites and the incidents, under the concerned number, in his diary.

After he had finished, he sat down to examine his map and his notes in detail. It was then that he made a startling discovery—the outcome of his commitment to method and detail. What Dr. Sen found was that the disappearances had all taken place roughly along a straight line joining the Shahid Minar to the Swetambar Jain Temple. Starting from the Esplanade-Chowringhee area, the points from which the vehicles had vanished, had moved erratically North-Eastwards and South-Westwards—but always along that line. In the latest incident, a car carrying a family of four, had disappeared, only that morning, from the Vivekananda Road. The reappearances on the other hand, seemed to be totally random, both with regard to time and place. However, when Sen went deeper into the matter, making detailed calculation on his PB-100 pocket computer, he found that the returnings were not as arbitrary as they had originally looked. Every single reappearance was within three kilometres or so of the corresponding disappearance. The length of the time between the going and the coming varied almost directly as the total mass of the object involved.

Sen checked and rechecked his calculations but could find no flaw in them. He then spent almost an hour making one more detailed calculation. In between he made two phone calls to check certain facts he was not sure about. When he finished, his hands were shaking with excitement, and his heart was beating much faster than it normally did. If the figures on the

sheets in front of him were correct—and there was no reason to suppose that they were not—then the missing Metro train with his wife on board, was due to reappear within 48 hours; and reappear in a place within a three-kilometre radius of the Esplanade Terminal. Drawing a circle of the requisite radius on his map with a compass, Sen was horrified to find that it covered a good stretch of the Hooghly. What the result would be if the train returned to current reality in the middle of the River, was something he did not want to think about.

To divert his mind, and to be able to present his case more convincingly (which he knew he would soon have to do), Sen decided to go into other aspects of the problem. He was confident he had found the effect—he was now looking for the cause. He already had a suspicion as to what it was. Physical objects did not travel instantaneously through space and time except under very special circumstances. Dr. Sen thought he knew what those circumstances were.

Late that evening, after he was satisfied that his line of reasoning was as water-tight as he could make it, Sen sought an appointment with the Chief Minister. It was a tribute to his eminence that despite his comparatively obscure post, when he explained why he wanted to see the CM, he was asked to come down almost immediately.

The CM's office carpet had taken quite a beating that week, and was continuing to do so as its incumbent kept up his restless pacing. The CM

was evidently a worried man. He greeted Dr. Sen, anxiously, as he entered.

"You have some definite information?" he asked, hopefully.

"Yes, sir!" replied Sen, confidently. "I am sure I have." He went on to add, "I am certain that the cause of all these mysterious happenings is a black-hole. Extremely minute perhaps but a black-hole definitely."

"A black-hole?" the CM was puzzled.

"Yes, sir, a black-hole." Sen explained further, how of all the forces in the Universe, only those associated with black-holes could possibly be the cause of the weird events that had taken place in Calcutta that week. The CM, a well-and-widely-read man, already knew as much as any layman about black-holes, and that made Sen's task easier. He explained to the CM that space-time jumps could only take place if the speed of light was exceeded, or if a black-hole was encountered. Since the objects that had disappeared had all been travelling at speeds measurable in tens of kilometres an hour at the most, it was obvious that they had encountered a black-hole; and since individual vehicles, some as small as a rickshaw or a scooter had vanished with nothing else in the vicinity being affected, it was equally obvious that the black-hole was microscopic in size. Since the black-hole behaved like one only spasmodically, something must have happened to dramatically change its normal properties—something which Sen was not sure about, but most probably was an encounter with a source of some form of massive energy. Sen was more sure as to why the black-

hole was travelling along the particular route it had taken, and also the reason why it was moving back and forth like a yo-yo on an invisible string.

"You know about the experiments we are working on in our University—the ones in which we are trying to find a room-temperature superconductor." Sen had reached a stage where the Chief Minister was not only fascinated by what he was saying, but also thoroughly convinced of the correctness of his theories." Well we have some tremendously powerful magnetic fields set up in one of our laboratories in connection with these experiments. Now if you look at this map closely, you will observe that our University lies on the line joining the Shahid Minar to the Swetambar Jain Temple and is almost exactly half-way between the two. I am sure that the black-hole has been, so to say, captured by our magnetic fields, and moves to and fro depending on how their strength and polarity is being varied for our experiments."

"Alright" the CM conceded. "I accept the fact that there is a tiny black-hole blundering about—maybe within a limited span—in this great city of ours, causing people and vehicles to vanish and come back like magic. So what are we going to do about it? Can't we get rid of it, or do we have to learn to live with it for the rest of our lives?"

Sen paused before answering. This was the only area which was still grey as far as he was concerned. How does one get rid of a black-hole? As per current theory, one of the chief characteristics of a black-hole was an unsatiable appetite for energy—any and every form of

energy—heat, light, sound or any other form, which it immediately swallowed as and when it encountered it. Keeping this fact in mind, the one possible method to remove the black-hole, as far as he could think, was to overload it with energy. Pour in enough power into the black-hole to ensure that it got 'indigestion'. Once it could no longer swallow any more energy, at least for the moment, additional power would be used to propel the black-hole into space, away from Earth. After that it was just bad luck for the next planet or system which received it; at least it would no longer be mankind's headache.

"Well, sir," Sen spoke with a confidence he really did not feel. "I think I know how to get rid of the black-hole, but for that I am going to need, power—lots and lots of power."

"The entire Damodar Valley output is yours Doctor," the CM offered rashly, showing just how upset he was at the moment. Then, more prudently, he added, "How much would you need and for how long?"

"I'll have to work out the exact amount," Sen replied. "However, considering the microscopic size of the black-hole, I don't think it will be more than a few megawatts; and if we time it right, the duration of requirement will hardly be a couple of seconds at the most. The major problems will not be the power, but will be firstly to locate and exactly pinpoint the black-hole after we have lured it into the position we want, and secondly, to set up a suitable circuit to feed the power into it."

"Can you do it?" It was more of a plea than a question.

"But definitely, sir!" Sen had decided that the time for diffidence was past. "The only restriction is that we have to ensure that it has not swallowed anybody or anything at the time when we kick it away from Earth once and for all, since it might take what it has with it. That means that we have to wait for the Metro train to reappear and keep very close tabs on any further disappearances. By the way, I believe the car that vanished this morning has come back."

"Yes," the CM confirmed. "It reappeared in Beadon Street and banged into a parked truck. Luckily, there were no serious injuries. I will cover the entire city with the various police and para-military forces that we have, and ensure that you are informed as soon as the Metro train returns. You ARE sure that it will come back?"

"Positive! Within forty-eight hours!" Sen was emphatic. "I'm off now to set up my black-hole trap-cum-booting-out apparatus, since there is not much time."

"My secretary on Special Duty will be with you within an hour," the CM promised. "He will arrange for your power requirements and anything else you may want. You have carte blanche, Doctor."

Events moved rather fast, thereafter. Sen drove back to the University, and despite the lateness of the hour, gathered his staff quickly together. He requisitioned the services of the best electrical engineer on the campus and then briefed everyone. After that, they got down to work. First of all they went down to the laboratory where the superconductor experiments were

taking place and stepped up the power of the magnetic field to the maximum. Next, Sen divided the 'task force' into two groups. One group was given the task of designing and setting up the black-hole detector which was a fairly simple energy-locating device. The second group was made responsible to position the 'gun'. The principle of the gun was simple—being based on the lines of a welding arc. Once the black-hole had been 'fixed' and all the objects it had swallowed had come back, the anode-plate would be fed into it. Simultaneously, in the milli-second that the black-hole required to devour the plate, an enormous bolt of power would be fed onto the latter using a specially designed cathode. If all went well, the bolt would not only satiate the black-hole for the moment, but would have sufficient energy left over to give it a push which could throw it off the Earth. Hopefully, it would not come back. Sen and his group went to work diligently.

The rest of the story is history. The black-hole was trapped and held in position by the judicious manipulation of the laboratory's magnetic field. During the next two days, the black-hole's appetite was kept satisfied by controlled feeding of power into it. The actual requirement of energy was far less than Sen had feared, since the black-hole (having been modified drastically) behaved like one only during short intervals, as already told. It was quiescent for most of the time. Sen's detector warned him whenever the black-hole grew 'hungry'. In the meantime, thousands of

policemen, para-military personnel, volunteers and would-be-headline-grabbers roamed the city areas where the Metro train was likely to reappear.

Dr. Sen's prediction proved right. The Metro train did return, almost exactly on schedule. The word was flashed to him and he culminated his epoch-making efforts by firing his 'gun' as soon as the black-hole grew active again after that. As planned, the anode-plate was dropped into the black-hole. At the same time, using a Kryton timing device, a blast of several megawatts of power was sent in after the plate. Dr. Sen's second prediction also proved correct. The energy poured into the black-hole, not only almost gave it a 'stomach-ache', but also booted it away from the Earth, into outer space where it still presumably is.

The only item of interest, left to be narrated is the aftermath of the reappearance of the Metro train. Of course, all the commuters on the train, including Dr. Sen's wife, came back safe and sound; and Dr. Sen was given several awards. The real importance of the return lay in the place where it occurred. The Metro train returned to reality on the approach to the second Howrah Bridge. By some curious coincidence of fate, when it returned, its wheels were actually on the rails of the railway track leading to the Bridge. And so, before the driver or anybody else realised it, the train had crossed the Bridge, thereby inaugurating it—although inadvertently.

So, thanks to the black-hole, the Calcuttans, at last, had a working Second Bridge.

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